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SUBJECT: EDITORIAL ON GUYANA'S SECURITY CHALLENGE

REF: GEORGETOWN 111

The editorial in Sunday's Stabroek News describes very well the conundrum of security in Guyana and the state's limited capability to police its territory. The Stabroek News is Guyana's leading independent daily newspaper.

Begin quote:

An effective state
Sunday, February 12th 2006

Given all the circumstances the police undoubtedly made a wise decision not to go into Buxton during the funeral of Mr Ronald Waddell last Saturday, although they did accompany the procession up the East Coast highway, and armed ranks lined both sides of the road as the motorcade passed through Annandale. While the judgement of the police cannot be faulted on this occasion, nevertheless, the fact that Buxton is still a no-go area for the authorities speaks volumes about the capabilities of the state.

Last week at a press conference in Freedom House, the PPP had one of its periodic grumbles about the failure of the police to rid the village of gunmen, as if in some split personality sense, it was no longer the party in government with its hands on the levers of power. It is clear that despite all that has happened, the party has not yet come to terms with how this situation evolved and its role in the process. Which is a pity, because we live in troubled times, which require a realistic approach in assessing events and a sensitivity of judgement when making decisions.

The PPP/C came into office at a disadvantage in 1992, in the sense that it did not trust the security forces, whose members were seen as being loyal to the main opposition. In addition, where the GPF was concerned, the professionalism of this force had been seriously undermined under the PNC and corruption was already a major problem. Also noteworthy was the fact that the previous government had depended on a special unit in the force which had become notorious for its association with extra-judicial killings.

One might have thought that the new government would have regarded it as a priority to build a genuinely professional police force with forensic and investigative capability, deal with corruption among its members, move away from a reliance on what was popularly known as the "death squad," invest some real money in equipping the GPF, explore ways of encouraging Indians to join, and negotiate with the IMF over the matter of salaries so that officers would at least be beyond temptation where petty bribes were concerned.

History, however, got in the way, and the experience of the 1960s blinded the government to a rational approach to the problem of their security. Instead of enhancing the professional capacity of the police, they undermined the institution of the GPF. It was starved of equipment, and there was political interference at various levels in its operations, because the administration placed its trust in those individuals and groups within the force with whom it felt comfortable, rather than in the force as a whole. Inevitably this subverted the normal chain of command.

In addition, the administration placed its trust in the Target Special Squad - taking the same route as its predecessor - which became notorious for the allegations of extra-judicial killings made against it. Furthermore, it defended the TSS vigorously, despite the fact that the latter was perceived as targeting African victims, thereby raising the political temperature, and despite the fact that it emerged during a grand jury hearing in the United States into a US visa scam that some of its members were involved in corrupt activities and had hired themselves out as an enforcement squad.

And then 2002 hit the country, and the government found

itself with a thoroughly demoralized, totally ill-equipped police force with neither the human nor technical resources to confront the crisis. Furthermore, because of the level of corruption among its officers, the public did not trust the GPF with information, which effectively ruled out any intelligence-led investigations.

It is true that eventually the government was prevailed upon to disband the TSS and pour some funds into the police force, but in the meantime the immediate problem of the major Buxton gunmen was dealt with by shadowy death squads, whose possible association with the state has never been elucidated because the government has never held a comprehensive enquiry into the matter - or even into the origin and development of the Buxton phenomenon in the first instance. The limited enquiry which was held, while it cleared then Minister of Home Affairs Ronald Gajraj from any association with such a squad (or squads), did not address the larger question.

As it is the death squad(s) are still around, while a new generation of gunmen haunts the southern reaches of Buxton. And the weakened enforcement arms of the state have so far been unable to deal with either. On an ominous note we have started this election year with the killing of a political activist, and given the tensions and the number of gunmen of whatever affiliation around, we say again, it is imperative for the health of the nation that this case be solved. We say again too, if the police cannot make progress, then the government must seek external assistance.

Rebuilding the Guyana Police Force is going to take time, but the administration should do all it can to facilitate that process by among other things implementing the recommendations of the Disciplined Services report. It should also start confronting problems directly, rather than indirectly as is its wont. It is only when the state is seen to exert itself in a lawful fashion that it will be perceived to be strong and not weak. And the state needs to be perceived as effective at the moment; after all, the warlords are waiting in the wings.

End quote.

BULLEN